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ON JEAN BAUDRILLARD'S PATAPHYSICS

LEXICON, NONPOLITICS, PHILOFICTION BAUDRILLARD, NON-PHILOSOPHY

The cultural philosopher Jean Baudrillard's birthday is on July 27th and I thought it might be worthwhile to review his very first text, one that is relatively unknown to the general public. Many in the art world are familiar at least with ideas from his seminal 1981 book *Simulacra and Simulation* where he mulls over Marshall McLuhan's observations on art and media in relation to the simulacra with such gems as, "There is not only an implosion of the message in the medium, there is, in the same movement, the implosion of the medium itself in the real, the implosion of the medium and of the real in a sort of hyper-real nebula, in which even the definition and distinct action of the medium can no longer be determined. (...) The medium itself is no longer identifiable as such, and the confusion of the medium and the message is the first great formula of this new era."

Now where might have that kind of language come from? I suggest from his very beginnings with the circa-1950 text *Pataphysics*.

The first remarkable thing about his already unavailable limited edition book *Pataphysics* is its passé, handmade, deckle-edged, luxury cover. I say remarkable in that I still tend to identify Baudrillard (who passed away in 2007) with the small, slick black Semiotext(e) introduced him to America; covers which implied more of a techno aesthetic than this solemn neo-gothic one.

The second remarkable thing about this book is its slim size: it is only 14 pages long! Thus I was immediately struck by the nonsensical pairing of a distinguished looking façade that supposedly signified some kind of venerable "authenticity" with the interior teensy-weensy substantive content.

But as I gleefully plunged past the sign-value packaging and into the distinguished Simon Watson Taylor's English translation (his final) of this text – ostensibly on the subject of Pataphysics, which Baudrillard here defines as "the philosophy of gaseous states," as "tautology" (the use of redundant language that adds no information) (p. 8) and as "the mind's loftiest temptation" (p. 7) – then this pairing made a peculiarly drôle sense, as immediately I started reading about "fake" "stucco" "self-infatuation" and "vast flatulence," (p. 7) followed by talk of "fake universes." (p. 8)

I had first encountered this slim but fascinating text, which Baudrillard wrote at the tender age 21, when it appeared unexpectedly in Baudrillard's collection of art-related essays which Sylvère Lotringer's Semiotext(e) released in 2005 called *The Conspiracy of Art* (it is a different translation, however). But lacking the kind of provocative packaging Atlas (in association with The London

Institute of Pataphysics) has given this version, it made a rather minor impact on me at the time. But this rather pretentiously packaged feign stucco-coated version has focused my mind sympathetically, by actualizing some of the significant pataphysical concepts raised within the text itself. And for that, its idiosyncratic design intelligence can be appreciated.

Of course this faux style preference is internally consistent with Baudrillard's notion that systems of signification and meaning are only understandable in terms of their ambivalent interrelationships. How better to reinforce his iconic concepts of viral seduction, simulation, and hyperreality than this paradoxical presentation of the blatantly fake conservative exterior with the imaginative far-out interior?

One might first be tempted to point to the traditionalist signifiers being played with here as substantive affirmation of what some of his readers have identified as Baudrillard's rather thinly veiled conservative longing for a lost originality in face of digital virtuality; an impulse which verges on the nauseating nostalgic. Indeed this impression is enhanced when reading in the prelude that the publisher played the rare book ploy here: with only 177 books being produced, now all unavailable. Undeniably, such a comic example of self-imposed rarity in the age of virtuality can be infuriating – but that would be taking this project way too seriously. Assuredly, because Baudrillard here put forth that “Pataphysics is not serious” but that it possesses a silliness that “constitutes precisely its seriousness.” (p. 10) So perhaps it is better to just concentrate on the book's intangible intellectual pleasures, which I shall describe here.

First off, there is the pleasure to be found in probing Baudrillard backwards (so to speak) in terms of hyperreal nonsense. Backwards, in that most already know, considerably well, his mid-career and late oeuvre, but poorly, if at all, such early formative texts. And following this backwards flip, it is a pleasure to examine him circularly (again a pataphysical quality) in that Baudrillard moreover defines Pataphysics as that which “revolves around itself.” (p. 8) So through this youthful book, we regressively and retrospectively time-trip/spin-view Baudrillard's observations, theories and analyses of technological communication through a young and delirious metaphysics deeply inspired by French and German poetry, the pataphysical anti-concepts developed by Alfred Jarry, and the brilliant lapidary ravings of Antonin Artaud. Baudrillard writing, “Artaud demands a re-evaluation of creation, of coming into the world.” (p. 10)

The Collège de Pataphysique was founded on May 11th, 1948 by an anarchic group of artists and writers interested in the philosophy of Pataphysics. These zealots devoted their time to perpetuating (and often distorting) Jarry's philosophical pranks. In 1959 Marcel Duchamp agreed to be a satrap in the Collège de Pataphysique and there have been numerous links established with the Oulipo literary movement – specifically through the participation in both groups by the poet Raymond Queneau. The fabulous wordsmith Jean Genet has described himself as following in the pataphysical tradition. Baudrillard eventually became a transcendent satrap there.

For anyone who may not know, the traditional understanding of Pataphysics is the absurdist pseudo-philosophy/ideology devised by Alfred Jarry based in his obsessive circumnavigations around mocked-up topographies. The term first appeared in print in Jarry's article Guignol in the April 28th, 1893 issue of *L'Écho de Paris littéraire illustré*. It is intended as a form of conceptual hot air (flatulent) nonsense. A practitioner of Pataphysics is a pataphysician or a pataphysicist. For Jarry, Pataphysics is the anti-scientific realm beyond metaphysics that examines the laws that preside over exceptions – an attempt to elucidate an imaginary cosmos. Jarry specifically defined Pataphysics as the “science of imaginary solutions, which symbolically attributes the properties of objects, described by their virtuality, to their lineaments.”

In the Baudrillard *Pataphysics* book, Baudrillard builds his theory on Jarry's play *Ubu Roi*. A play that created a famous scandal when it was first performed at the Theatre de l'Oeuvre in Paris in 1896. *Ubu Roi* is an important precursor of Dada. Through a language of shocking lad hilarity, *Ubu Roi* tells the farcical story of Père Ubu, an officer of the King of Poland and a grotesque figure who epitomizes the mediocrity and idiocy of middle-class officialdom. Baudrillard makes swift reference to Père Ubu (p. 7) while defining Ubu as “the gaseous and caricatural state” of intricacy that is a fart.

Baudrillard points out that it was through the writing *Ubu Roi* that Jarry became the creator of an absurd a-logic that came to define the “science of imaginary solutions” as enshrined, since 1948, in the Collège de Pataphysique, which Baudrillard calls “anaemic” and “impossible” in that its “procedure is a vicious circle within.” (p. 11)

Nevertheless, Baudrillard's slim *Pataphysics* book provides the chance to see better the airy void around us – to see beneath the stucco surface of *Maya* (what in Indian philosophy refers to the purely phenomenal, insubstantial character of the everyday world) – so as to enjoy fleeting (absurd) life all the more, at least for the moment.

So I recognized here some funny roots, taken seriously, that may have nurtured Baudrillard's hyperbolic and jaded view of an incongruous virtual-reality drenched world. In Jarry, we already relish an artificial Baudrillardian simulated world created by an hallucinatory social structure where shimmering objects decree in odd ways what people can and cannot do within the vast void of virtuality. Indeed, like Jarry, Baudrillard mostly arrives at his social examinations without demonstrating any sustained systematic analysis. *Poof! Voila*: a gaseous *bon délire*: an airy imaginary solution. But in Pataphysics, every occurrence in the universe is established to be an extraordinary event. Hence simulation is unrealizable.

Of course this aim of creating an inorganic world, ex nihilo, and luxuriating in its rarefied artificiality, was not unique to Jarry. It was perfectly articulated in 1884 with the publication of Joris-Karl Huysmans's decadent novel *A Rebours* (Against Nature), a story of a

recluse art worshiper who yearns for new sensations and perverse pleasures within a transcendental artificial ideal. It is a classic of *décadent* French theory, theory nearly equivalent to Fin-de-Siècle symbolist theory, that which aspired to set art free from the materialistic preoccupations of industrial society.

But what struck me as most exact in the young Baudrillard text's bizarre propositions was its deep reflection (one might even say brooding) on the theme of farting ignobility. And this shoddily shifted something in my appreciation of Baudrillard's total word production. Notably, evident throughout Baudrillard's career, is a display of a mordantly witty obsession with language as flatulent smoke – language that tests the limits of form and stretches the bounds of meaning towards negation. So, Baudrillard's *Pataphysics* is a reality-rejecting book that delivers an airy irrational punch of nonsensical negation to theory by tying together methods of insouciant informality with visceral camp irony: at turns hip and flamboyant and morally outrageous. At times the text simulates the disappearing ephemeral we associate with electronically provided information today on the Internet, and the flickering of its translucent form. I, the reader, am expected to work devotedly to solve the absurd flatulent conundrums supplied here. To provide psychological transitions, between the diverse assortments of irrational elements that supply the text its pataphysical hooks. I am required to fabricate a complicated forensic fairy-tale out of this flatulent mélange. Which kept slipping in and out of idiosyncratic narration. But that slipping narration kept turning back into something profoundly singular: the stink of death. That deeply strange, incurable, irrational affliction we altogether share. What Baudrillard defines as, the "narcissism" of "a lethal eccentricity." (p. 8)

So, I interpret this text as a meditation on humiliating death, in all its nasty comedy. It is a young man's text about droll, difficult death. It is a book about the awareness of the impertinent finery of flatulent decomposition. Which makes life seem faintly funny in face of death's inexorability. Thus the book clearly shows the young philosopher's pre-knowledge of dumb death's putrid ignobility. And this is what gives the work its weird sense of dignity – a dignity that asserts life's primacy over death, because death is beyond narration and words.

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